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Orientation is Key for First-Year Students

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TRANSITION FOR STUDENTS

Orientation is key for first-year students

Students start with a clean slate in college, says **Mary O'Rawe**

THE focus on college drop-out rates, particularly in first year, and debates around fees and funding, remind us to consider why students find it so difficult to make the transition from secondary school to higher education.

So how can incoming students prepare themselves to make the best academic transition?

The key to getting a good start is attending the orientation. This is a day, days or increasingly, an extended period of transition and academic supports, devised specifically by those who understand the characteristics of a particular first-year group at a college.

These tutorials or online supports are invaluable for getting accustomed to academic writing, reading, note-taking and the all-important critical thinking. Often, there is also a 'toolkit' of assistive technologies and apps to ease the transition.

While learners will be supported, they must also take full responsibility for submit-

ting work and parts of work. Non-submission of something small can be the difference between progression to second year and a summer of worry. Students have a clean academic slate starting in college, so even subjects that troubled them before can be approached differently and with new eyes.

What will the learning environment be like? Images of a packed, tiered lecture theatre do not apply to every class — expect smaller rooms, breakout-style and tutorials. Students will be used to moving around in school, but perhaps not accustomed to having gaps in the timetable. This can be troublesome to new undergraduates.

Knowing what the programme is about is crucial. Now's the time to get the facts straight. What exactly will have to be completed in first-year? How many modules? Is there a mandatory threshold that must be met in all/certain modules? Can exemptions be gained in some modules due to prior study?



Mary O'Rawe pictured at DIT, Cathal Brugha Street. PHOTO: COLIN O'RIORDAN

Attend, engage, submit: Top tips to succeed in first year at college

- 1** Attend your orientation and any follow-up support meetings.
- 2** Turn up to all lectures and tutorials — this can be the deal-breaker. It builds good learning patterns and puts you on the 'inside track' — much information won't be posted on a virtual learning environment.
- 3** One hour's timetabled requirement generally equates to an additional two/three hours of your own input.
- 4** Get to know your tutor — they can help you with problems settling in, or point you in the right direction.
- 5** Submit everything. It might be only 5 or 10pc of the module, but

can mean the difference between progressing to second year and repeating.

6 Talk to someone. All universities and colleges are now well equipped with careers, counselling, and retention officers. It is common to have doubts about your programme choice or feel emotional pressures.

7 Engage — with your programme, other students and your lecturing team. Create allies for yourself. Everyone is in the same boat. It takes time to develop new relationships.

8 If you have personal circumstances such as special needs or a learning disability, you need to get registered

early. It will be considered in your results.

9 Love your librarian: more important than ever in this digital age.

10 ENJOY. All of the above are important in a successful academic transition, but they will also contribute to ensuring that the college experience will stand to you and stay with you.

**Mary O'Rawe lectures in Management and Innovation Management at the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, DIT, and manages the school's orientation and first-year transition initiative 'Get Smart!'*

TRANSITION FOR PARENTS

Parents, may we have a word in your ear?

Eamonn O Dochartaigh

CONGRATULATIONS! Your son or daughter is entering higher education. All that effort they put in, as well as all those years of encouraging and nurturing and guiding that you put in as a parent or guardian have paid off.

For most parents, the pride and joy that are experienced when their son or daughter heads off to college are often coupled with twinges of worry. Every family is unique as is each individual within it, with their own particular challenges, joys, expectations, and concerns.

It's an emotional journey for both parents and students. When students go to higher education for the first time, their maturity and independence evolve at a rapid pace.

They develop support systems outside the family unit and start to fine-tune their own interests and problem-solving abilities.

This transitional period can be filled with a mixture of emotions for both parent and student. We hope that the joys will far outweigh any concerns.

The transition into third level education is complex — exciting and scary all at the same time for both students and parents. It is a transition for you as well as for your student. When they are in college there are a few things you can do to make the transition and adjustment easier.

- * Be patient with your student and allow for space and privacy;
- * Have trust in your student;
- * Accept who your student is becoming without judgment or criticism;
- * Provide assistance and reassurance when needed;
- * Readjust expectations when your child is home from college;
- * Show your love.

Though your role changes, you will still need to parent — just in a different way. Provide assistance or reassurance as your student



Watching your son or daughter prepare to leave for college is an emotional time for everyone. Inset: Eamonn O Dochartaigh

pursues new interests and passions.

Remember that stress is one of the main factors affecting academic performance. Some

stress can be prevented, but not all stress is avoidable, so it's important to help students learn to cope with it effectively. Strategies include regular

exercise, healthy nutrition (particularly cutting back on caffeine and sugar), meditation and fun social activities.

It is important also to stay connected. Whether it's by email, text or a phone call, be supportive when you communicate, and let your student know that you will always be available. Work out an agreement as to how often you expect them to contact you, and in what circumstances and how often you will contact them.

When your student comes home, over time they will become more mature, which means you may need to renegotiate house rules and expectations. Be flexible and find a compromise where you will both be happy.

Having patience, being flexible, and keeping the lines of communication open can help create and maintain a healthy relationship.

Eamonn O Dochartaigh is a student counsellor at NUI Galway